

**VSR ~ 3rd Question & Answer Session
with Ven. Thubten Chodron
Saturday, December 31, 2005**

VTC: How is everybody?

Retreatant: Still here.

VTC: You haven't run down the hill yet? (laughter) I got a letter from Dan and I wanted to read a little part that he wrote. He's been out of jail now since October, so about two months. He was just writing about his experience being incarcerated.

[VTC reads from the letter] He said, "*All we are really doing upon release is exchanging the problems of incarceration for a different set of problems associated with release.*"

This sounds like Lama Zopa, doesn't it? Exactly what Rinpoche says, because in samsara, that's it, isn't it? If it's not one set of problems it's another set of problems. When you're not married, you have the problems of not being married; when you're married, then you have the problems of being married. When you don't have kids, you have the problems of not having kids, and when you have kids, you have the problems of having kids. (laughter) Pick your problems: there's no lasting happiness in samsara! So this is a real good insight he had here.

[VTC reads again] He said, "*I tried to avoid the trap that so many prisoners fall into: thinking that all our problems will magically disappear once we are released.*"

How many times have we, in our lives, in the meditation session, thought, "if I only had x, y, z situation, then all of my problems would be over." We all think that way, don't we?

[VTC continues reading from the letter] "*I call this 'the panacea of physical release'. Simply, it is a fantasy, a delusion. All we are doing is exchanging the physical prison of incarceration for the samsaric prison of so-called release. Don't get me wrong, of course I'm very happy to get released. I would definitely prefer that over incarceration in any case. But I'm just trying to keep things in perspective, and as long as I temper the joy of release with the understanding that I cannot take the happiness of release for granted, that I must create the causes for my happiness through daily dharma practice and living ethically, then the results will come. I must not be anxious, depressed, or disappointed about expecting the results of happiness and freedom to come immediately. Practice, practice, practice. Create the causes; results will come in due time. It is a practice in patience. Wanting to create the causes is the reason why I've taken my kind-hearted teacher's advice: to participate in the Vajrasattva retreat. It would have been easy for me to decline Venerable Chodron's request to do the retreat with the excuse that my life is simply way too hectic presently because I'm trying to deal with life after release (which is indeed exactly what I told her when she asked, being the lazy sentient that I can be sometimes!). But, thankfully, Venerable kindly and rightly reminded me that it is precisely times like these when we need dharma the most.*

"*Looking back after a couple of weeks of retreat, I'm very glad that I did participate during this time of release and opportunity. I know in many ways that my journey is just beginning. I'm very grateful to Venerable Chodron and my dharma brothers and sisters incarcerated, at home, and at Sravasti Abbey for giving me this precious opportunity to share in such a powerful and transformative retreat. It is, after all, my sincere and true motivation to improve myself so that I can be of greater benefit to all living beings.*"

Isn't that nice? You'll get to read the whole thing later after it's typed up. He wrote a very nice poem for his parents too—you can read that as well. I just thought to share that with you so you can see how some of the other people are doing with the retreat.

Okay, should we just dig in to *The 37 Practices of a Bodhisattva*? We did one, two, and three last time, so we'll just dig in to four...

4. Loved ones who have long kept company will part,
Wealth created with difficulty will be left behind
Consciousness, the guest, will leave the guest house of the body.
Let go of this life—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

It's one of the most powerful verses for me. True, or not true?

R: True.

VTC: Do we like it, or not? (laughter) No. We want it to read: "loved ones who have long kept company will stay with us forever and ever and ever; wealth created—not with difficulty, but with ease—will always be here; consciousness, the guest, will stay in the guest house of the body for eternal life in the dukkha of samsara." This is what ignorant mind wants, isn't it? Completely ignorant mind.

I got another email from one of the other inmates who's had a drug problem for years and years. He made this comment: "*why can something so bad feel so good?*" It's like his koan: 'why can something so bad feel so good?' I was thinking about that, and what I came up with is that it just shows how ignorant our mind is. Doesn't it? That something that causes so much suffering we take as happiness. That's one of the four distortions. Remember, we were talking about the four distortions—that's exactly it.

What Togmey Sangpo is compassionately advising us here is to just let go of the whole mess. Think of how much time in your meditations you've spent fretting about your loved ones. It would be very interesting some time to keep track for a week of how much time you spend on thinking about what, either during your session or during the day: how much time you've spent thinking about your family, the people you love, your friends, the people who are close to you. How much time have we spent? And what kind of thoughts? Longing to be with them, worrying about them getting old...all kinds of different thoughts. And how much time do we spend on this? "Bye, bye Vajrasattva. Hello, all the people I'm attached to!" (laughter) At the end of the day, what is it? ***Loved ones who have long kept company will part.*** That's the end of it. Nothing to do about it. And yet how much time we've spent ruminating over them: for what? Has it changed anything—all of our worry, all of our attachment, all of our daydreams, all of our wonderful memories, all of our visualizations for the future?

It would be interesting to look at how much time in our life we spend thinking about wealth. Our money, how much we have in our account, and how much you earned last year, how much you're going to have to pay in taxes. And then all of your possessions: what ones you have here, what ones you have in storage, what ones you left at home that you really wish you could have, and what ones you really want to buy after retreat is done. All the little things, e.g.: "wouldn't it be nice, after retreat is over, I could have this, and this, and this. It will be a different season, so I'll really need that!" And all of our financial planning also. We had a skit one time in Mexico... It was fantastic. One of the retreatants did the skit at the end of the retreat—everybody, in their skit, was just acting out their distractions—his thing was money. So, on his puja table he had his computer and his cell phone, and he's doing his mantra but saying, "Hello? New York Stock Exchange? Sell this one, yes! Buy that one,

quick, right away! And that one: transfer it from this account to that account.” (laughter) It was great.

You can do a whole meditation session on that: how to manage our money, how to get more money, worry about losing it, our possessions, things like that. We spend so much time thinking about it. And what happens with it? *Wealth created with difficulty will be left behind.* No choice.

Consciousness, the guest, will leave the guest house of the body. “No it won’t, my body is ME!” This is the big object of attachment, isn’t it? My body is me, and the comfort of my body, the well-being of my body, the continuity of my body, everything. How much time do we spend in one day thinking about the body: what it’s going to eat, what we have to do to feed it, what our bed is like, if it’s too hard, if it’s too soft, if the temperature is too hot or too cold for the body, if we like the climate or we don’t like the climate, if our knees hurt, or our back hurts, or if our nose is too dry, or if we have the sniffles, if our stomach hurts—whatever it is, how much time we spend thinking about this body, making it comfortable as much as possible.

And we worry about it getting old. What are we going to do when our body gets old and we can’t do the things we want to? Can we afford an electric wheelchair? (laughter) What happens if we’re quadriplegic: how are we going to communicate with anybody? What happens if we’re incontinent and other people are going to have to change our diapers? How ashamed we’re going to feel, and who do we want to change our diapers, and oh, it’s going to be so embarrassing—All this stuff about the body! How much time we spend thinking about it. Again, *consciousness is going to leave the guest house of the body.* That’s all the body is: it’s a hotel that we’re living in for a while. And when we check out, that’s it. You leave it behind. We don’t even clean up after ourselves—other people have to take care of our corpse! We leave the corpse here and it’s smelly and it’s dirty and they’re afraid of it, and they have to handle it: pretty inconsiderate! At least we could dissolve into a rainbow body, so people don’t have to clean up after us. (laughter) We just check out, and the body is there.

It’s very good in your meditation to imagine your own funeral. There you are, and they have you nicely laid out. First you do *the nice scene*: you had a nice death. There you are, and they’ve done the embalming really nice, so you look like you’re just sleeping, and you’re so peaceful, and the complexion is very nice, and your hair is so beautiful, and you’re wearing your favorite clothes, and you just look so good. Then everybody’s coming and walking by you and saying, “Oh, she’s such a wonderful person. How good they look. How kind they were. How much I miss them.” And then they all walk by and they say these things. Of course, you’re dead, so everybody says something nice when they’re there. (laughter) And then they all go and eat. (laughter) They all go and eat, and then they cry a little bit because they miss you, and then some other things come up—some of the things that you did that they really didn’t like. (laughter) Maybe even at the memorial service they tell some of the funny things that you did that you’re embarrassed to death that they remember? Do you have things like that? Just imagine your whole funeral and what everybody’s going to do. How they’re all going to sit and think what to do with your stuff, and how to divide your money.

This happened to someone I know. They were getting married, and one of their relatives flew in from out of town for the wedding. The morning of the wedding, the relative was taking a bath, and died in the bathtub. Here’s this person, getting married that night, and his relative had died in the morning. They decided to keep on with the wedding, although they cancelled the music. They had the wedding. Here he is, getting married and dealing with his relative’s death on the same day, and then another relative goes over to him and starts asking him if he’s thought about what he’s going to do with the investments and

the real estate, and the property and the house. That's what's going to happen, even if you don't have stocks or real estate. What are we going to do with your clothes, and all of your books, and this stack of paper that you've kept since beginningless time that you were always going to sort through and never did. (laughter) And now your relatives have to do it! They're dealing with this and that and the other thing.

Do a meditation session on the funeral, *the nice funeral*. They're all weeping appropriately and saying how nice you were. Then, run the scene in a different way, and you died in a *horrible* accident, and your body is very disfigured. Or you died when you were 95 and you had Alzheimer's for the last twenty years, so your whole body is 95 years old and wrinkled and you've been out of it for the last twenty years. Or you die of cancer, and your body is completely emaciated and you look like somebody who just walked out of Auschwitz, and that's what's in the casket. No way they're going to make that one look beautiful: sunken cheeks and everything. Or maybe you're old and you lost your teeth. Or you died in an accident and everything is all cut up, so you don't look very nice. So maybe they decide not even to have an open casket funeral; they don't even want to show your body. How do you feel about that? Or maybe the brave ones come and look at your body, and they look and respond with shock. Of course, they have a picture of you there from when you were young and looked really nice: one of those nice pictures when you're young and smiling and happy and look really healthy. There's that picture and then there's this emaciated, cancer-ridden or Alzheimer's-ridden body. And then imagine the funeral from that point of view. What are they going to say?

Don't necessarily think of it being when—I gave this example—when you're 95. But think of a funeral e.g. if you died within a month, and there you are, however old you are now, and you're there in the casket. Everybody is walking by. And where are you? Finally everybody who had never told you how much they love you, finally, when you're dead they're sitting there crying, saying how much they love you. But you're nowhere around to hear it. Just do some contemplation about this. What really is meaningful in life? Our loved ones, our wealth, our body: does any of it come with us to our next life? Nothing.

What comes with us to our next life? The karma we created acquiring these things, protecting these things—all that karma is what comes with us. All the karma created by attachment, craving these things; all the karma created out of jealousy because other people have it better than we do; all the karma created out of anger, protecting our body, our loved ones, our wealth: all that karma comes with us. The things that we created the karma with: Gone.

Really do some serious thinking about that, about what's really important. And when you do this kind of serious thinking, it's shocking okay, but it should not be depressing. If it's depressing it's because you're holding onto the view of only this life. And so if we only believe in this life, then the idea of separating from loved ones, our possessions and our body becomes terrifying. Then the idea of separating from it leads to depression. So if you're feeling unhappy it's because the minds really only thinking in terms of this lifetime. If we think in terms of many, many lifetimes, if we think in terms of our Buddha nature and what the meaning and opportunity of our life is, i.e. the ability to make our life meaningful by creating the causes for liberation and enlightenment... When you think of that and that deeper meaning and long-term purpose of your life, then separating from these things is not at all scary or depressing. Because this life is like a flash of lightening (snaps fingers) just like Shantideva said, like a flash of lightening (snaps fingers). Here, and it's gone. When you think of beginningless, previous rebirths, this life is nothing, you know. It's like it seems so real now, the appearance of inherent existence is so strong that everything seems so real and solid and fixed and permanent. But like this (snaps fingers) it goes, it's changing moment to moment and between one breath and the next we could be in the next life. So if we look at

our present experience in this big picture of past and future lives, then separating from these things is not scary, it's not depressing because your mind is focused on something much more important, much more worthwhile.

You realize you can't hold onto your loved ones; and even if you could, you can't pull them out of samsara when you yourself are deluded. And even if you tried to do everything that pleased all your loved ones, they're never going to be completely happy with you, never. So when you see that, then you see the real relationship to have with the people you love is the same kind of relationship you have with all sentient beings. Trying to internalize and actualize the Dharma as much as possible ourselves so that we can teach it to them when their minds are open and receptive. And that's the biggest and greatest way to help the people we cherish and to help all sentient beings.

But if we don't practice ourselves and we live our lives simply trying to take care of our loved ones, and our money and our body, forget about helping them— we're not even going to be able to keep ourselves out of the lower realms! Sometimes when we first get into the Dharma we start to see our attachments and our eight worldly concerns and we don't have much of a feel for future lives but we see the attachments clearly. And then we get very down on ourselves, "Oh I have so much attachment. Here's this peanut butter and jelly sandwich and I'm just craving it! Ahh! I have so much attachment— sinful, evil! (laughter) Why am I so attached to this stupid peanut butter and jelly sandwich that I've been daydreaming about during my whole meditation?!"

We dwell on these small things and we get so down on ourselves. "Oh I saw somebody who was very handsome and my mind, ohh— I just want to look at this attractive person. Oh how evil I am! How much attachment I have! Oh this is terrible; I'm never going to get enlightenment this way. I am just a horrible Dharma student! My teachers are going to give up hope on me. How can I ever practice the Dharma?"

You know how it is. We get into these incredible guilt-trips, over some small attachment or something. Then we sit there and squeeze ourselves (with eyes closed): "Okay. This attractive person, they're just blood and guts—blood and guts—blood and guts—blood and guts! I'm just going to see the blood and guts—blood and guts! Yeah, okay, I'm not attached anymore." Then we open our eyes and look, "Ohh, they're sooo gorgeous! Ohh, I'm so evil! Oh I have to think they're just blood and guts—blood and guts—blood and guts!" We just drive ourselves completely crazy.

So instead of doing this, the way around this is to start thinking and change the whole paradigm in which you see your life, start thinking of past and future lives. Start thinking, "I have beginningless rebirths. Wow! All these different rebirths. I've done all these different things. I've been in the hell realm; I've been in the sense pleasure deluxe god realm. I've even had samadhi before, the peak of samsara... these incredible samadhi absorptions. Believe it or not, I've really had that. I've had all these things in samsara. I'm going to have future lives. Who knows where I'm going to be reborn. Everybody's been everything to me: friend, enemy, lover, stranger. They're going to continue to be that way to me."

If you just put what you merely label "I"... instead of thinking of it as just in this lifetime, this mind, this body, this personality, etc. Think of it as *an "I"* that's merely labeled on whatever five aggregates that happen to be there during any particular rebirth. If you put yourself in that perspective— of this vastness of infinite time and then say, "within this vastness of infinite time, is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich important? No. Is a good looking person important?" In that way your mind just sort of loses interest in those things.

Rather than fighting with yourself and feeling guilty because you have so much attachment and squeezing yourself to apply an antidote that is only on the intellectual level, instead broaden the scope of your mind to take in past and future lives. Just play with it a little bit. See if your whole relationship to the things you're attached to changes or not. "Oh

that skiing trip I wanted to go on that I didn't go on. Is it a big loss? No. It's okay. No sense getting bummed out about it." Are you seeing what I'm saying?

If you change your perspective then you stop the guilt-tripping and the internal civil war because your mind just loses interest in those things. Why? Because it's directed toward liberation and enlightenment; because it's directed to being of benefit to sentient beings. That's the thing that's more important to you at that time.

Next verse:

5. When you keep their company, your three poisons increase.
Your activities of hearing, thinking, and meditating decline and
They make you lose your love and compassion.

...

Who's that? Bad friends. So, *give up bad friends. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas*. When Geshe Ngawang Dhargay used to teach this, he said, 'bad friends don't come with horns on their head and fearful faces and evil expressions. He said bad friends come with smiles, and they're people who really on the surface mean well and seem to care about you. But because they only have the perspective of this life, the advice they give you isn't good advice in the long-term for your spiritual practice.' So people who only have the perspective of this life, for them having the most money is very important; having good possessions is very important; having comfort and pleasure of the body is very important; defending yourself from slander is important; having a good reputation is important; being well-liked and popular is important; avoiding blame and censor is important. To those people those things are important.

They care about us so they want us to do the things that will make us happy according to their version of happiness because they don't understand that when you follow those things with attachment and hatred, then you create negative karma, which is the cause for unhappiness. Often it's the people who seemingly care about us the most who are the 'bad friends' because they're the ones who are saying, "just come out to the movies... come on in the hot tub... just change the figures on your income tax—everybody changes the figures on their income tax. There's nothing wrong with it."

These are the people who will give you advice that is, at best, distracting from your dharma practice and, at worst, unethical because they're thinking of the benefit for your life [now]. In the newspaper all the time we're reading about CEOs and government officials and all those who have been so corrupt. Who gave them the advice and who supported them to do all those activities? Their friends! Didn't they? It was their friends who came and said "oh just come and we'll go to this bar, or go to this porn website, or we'll just do this business deal, or just change the figures on your reporting taxes, or just deal with the lobbyist in this way." It's always people who are their friends, those who allowed them to be involved in these shenanigans with.

So those are 'bad friends'. It doesn't mean we look at these people and we say, "Oh, you're a bad friend; get away from me!"—or this kind of thing. Rather, we don't deliberately cultivate their friendship and treasure their advice. We're polite; we're compassionate to them. But we have the friendship, the relationship in a certain perspective: we know that because they're only looking at things through the viewpoint of one life, so of course they're going to give certain advice. That doesn't mean we have to listen to it. Or they'll want us to do certain things because they're only thinking about our happiness in this life and they're not thinking about the karma you create to do it. So, of course, they're thinking like this! So we're compassionate towards them. They might be our relatives. So we're kind; we're

compassionate—but we just don't follow the advice. Then for people who we aren't good friends to be with, who are like this, we don't become good friends with them. We cherish our dharma friends. Friends are very important, aren't they?

Let me do the next verse:

6. When you rely on them your faults come to an end and
Your good qualities grow like the waxing moon.
Cherish spiritual teachers even more than your own body.
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

We often hear it quoted that the Buddha said that spiritual friends are all of the holy life. This quote is often taken out of context to mean just dharma friends or anyone who comes to a Buddhist center. Actually if you look at the whole context in the sutra, in the very next sentence, the Buddha is talking about himself as a spiritual mentor guiding these people. So when he's referring to "spiritual friends"—which is actually the literal translation of "Geshe"—the spiritual friend—it means your dharma teachers. They're the real spiritual friends.

Of course our dharma friends are also very important because our dharma friends understand that spiritual side of us, and if they're real dharma friends, they'll encourage us in that. If your dharma friends are saying to you, "let's go out and have a drink or smoke after dharma class," then you have to be careful. I don't know if they're real dharma friends. The dharma friends you can talk about practicing with, those are people who are quite important.

Of course, our spiritual teachers are the most important because they're the ones who show us the path. When we think of who's the kindest to us—it's an interesting thing to think about as we're changing our paradigms and perspectives—who's the kindest to us? We usually think, "oh the kindest person to us is our lover, our husband, our wife, our partner, our parents, our siblings"—somebody like that. But if you really think about it from a dharma perspective, sometimes these people don't know anything about dharma. From the point of who's really a friend, who's caring about our ultimate long-term welfare, who's caring about that the most?

It's our spiritual teacher, isn't it? They're the ones who are dragging us to enlightenment as we're kicking and screaming and saying, "I want to go to the beach instead!" And they're just sitting there lifetime after lifetime. Think of what the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have to go through trying to guide people like us. We're so lazy, and our mind is full of excuses why we can't go for teachings: "we can't practice; the dharma's too hard; the goal's too high; the path is too difficult; we're too inferior." We have all these reasons why we can't possibly do it. And then here are the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, lifetime after lifetime, hanging in there trying to drag us towards enlightenment!

So if you think of that kind of kindness, it's really something beyond words. They say that the holy beings have more compassion for us than we have for ourselves. You can see it in that light because when *we* think of compassion for ourselves, what do we think of? A nice warm, cozy bed! When *they* think of compassion for us, what do they think of? "Oh, this person has Buddha Nature! They have the potential to have love and compassion for everybody. They have the potential to have infinite bliss and see the nature of reality and make manifest bodies throughout the universe!" That's what they see when they look at us and when they have love and compassion for us. So you can see why it's said that they have more care for us than we have for ourselves.

Therefore, our spiritual teachers, the people who really guide us along the path are very, very important in that respect. That's why the relationship with them is so important. It

comes first in the Lamrim because it's really important for us to know how to properly rely on a spiritual mentor. In other words, not to project all of our fanciful expectations on the spiritual mentor, e.g. "oh well, this person is a Buddha so I don't have to tell them anything because they have clairvoyance and will read my mind." Or "they're a Buddha so they'll just whip in and rescue me from whatever difficulty my karma's gotten me into."

It's not having fanciful ideas about our spiritual mentors like that. But also not having ideas like, "well, they're just an ordinary sentient being. Look, they eat and they drink and they poo and they get mad and they sleep and they do everything like everybody else. They're not anything special. Why should I listen to them? Especially when they say things I don't like. Especially when they call me on my faults—spiritual mentors aren't supposed to do that! They're supposed to be loving and compassionate, and always say, 'ooh, I know you were trying so hard.'"

And all the excuses we can't make up for ourselves about why we don't do things, they're supposed to be compassionate and make up for us. Right? Isn't that what we think? "Oooh, I know you were trying so hard to practice the dharma, but your little toe hurt you, and oh, it was so much suffering, and I understand completely why you had to stay in bed all day because of your little toe. It's fine. Don't worry, there was no self-cherishing or laziness involved there." (laughter) This is what we want our spirituals mentors to do, don't we? They should think of all the excuses for us, be so compassionate, and then they're supposed to look at us and say, "oh, you're the best disciple I've ever had! You're so wonderful, so conscientious, so devoted, so intelligent, so compassionate. You're better than all the other people who come here." That's what our teachers are supposed to say, right? This is just our *namtok* (a Tibetan word often translated as 'hallucination'). This is not the proper way to rely upon a spiritual mentor.

This is why in the Lamrim, at the beginning, it talks about seeing the teacher's qualities, and then from that, generating respect for them and faith in them. Seeing their kindness to us, and generating a feeling of gratitude. And seeing that their kindness to us can often take the aspect of them saying things or doing things that at the beginning we don't seem to understand.

I was reading a book on Zen the other day. It was interesting because the Zen master who wrote it was talking about the role of the Zen master. It was exactly like in our tradition: it's a thankless job! The Zen master will sometimes try and really put people in front of their stuff and then the people get angry and just walk away from the practice altogether. It's the same old thing. That's why it's important to know how to properly rely upon a spiritual mentor, so that when things happen that don't make sense to us, or when our teacher says something that is not pleasant to our ears, and our ego gets involved, that we don't just give up the whole dharma because of something like this, some superficial, rather silly thing like this. That's why it's really important to really think about this topic.

One of my dharma friends—actually, he's the abbot at Shasta Abbey—he was telling me a story about their master, Jiyu-Kennett Roshi, who was quite a Zen master. He was quite a close disciple of hers, and he was telling me different stories about her. He said that whenever your mind was stuck on something, she would continually bring it up and talk about it. (laughter) Whatever you were stuck on—really attached to, very confused about, very angry about—she would just keep on bringing it up in conversation. Whatever it was, she just kept bringing it up, so you were just gritting your teeth, saying, "Oh, here it is *again*." She wouldn't necessarily even say something directly, but just would bring the topic up, and of course your whole ego gets involved... He watched this; and this is what happened with him. He said, "As soon as my mind let go of something, she never brought it up again." (laughter) "But as long as I was hooked on it, it kept coming again and again and again and again."

One of their animals got lost, and he had heard about putting these little chips in them, so he said to Roshi, “maybe we should put a little chip in, so that we can keep track of the animal’s whereabouts.” And she got so upset. “How dare you think of doing something like that! That’s horrible! Why would you do that do a poor animal?” She really chewed him out. And then about a year later, they were watching some kind of documentary, and the documentary was talking about putting chips into animals to keep track of them, and she looked at him and said, “Oh, Eko, don’t you think that’s a good idea? We should do that with our pets.” (laughter) And he said that he just said, “Yes, master.” He realized at that time that that was his practice: learning how not to get defensive when the ego wants to sit there and say, “I told you that a year ago and you chewed me out!”

What’s there to learn in that particular thing? Is being right your dharma lesson? Who cares if you’re right? Being right doesn’t count for *anything*. His dharma lesson at that time was learning some humility. And he got it. He said that after years of defending himself in those situations—“oh, I did it because of this and this and this, and you don’t understand this and this and this and this, and actually it’s your fault, master.” It’s important to really see that there’s a lot of training going on just in the day-to-day things that happen. It’s not just what happens in the dharma session. Sometimes it’s hard enough to take the dharma teachings and what happens in the dharma session, isn’t it? “I don’t like that teaching!” But then, just in day-to-day interactions, watching our mind and watching our buttons get pushed—and learning how to deal with that. That’s definitely part of the practice, definitely part of it. So it just depends on whether we get it, or whether we just keep on playing out our same old habitual things. That’s what we tend to do with our teachers, we play out our *same old habitual things*.

Venerable Jampa in Madison, she’s Geshe Sopa’s secretary. Geshe Sopa thinks George Bush is fantastic. Actually, a lot of the Tibetan lamas like George Bush. Of course, the rest of us are going, “HUH?” Just the practice of being able to sit there and listen to a political view that you just don’t agree with at all, that you think is very mistaken, and not get angry, not get upset—just be able to sit there and take it.

I’ve watched this. One time I was reading something and I was with His Holiness, and he was trying to explain something—something I was doing had turned out all screwed up, and he was trying to explain this dharma point to me. I kept on saying, “I don’t understand and I don’t get it... I don’t get it.” Finally, he looked at me and said, “I’ve explained this in so many teachings! Have you been sleeping the whole time?” My old mechanism (snaps fingers) of get defensive, “oh, well, no, it’s just that actually I didn’t understand the Tibetan terms you were using because I didn’t understand what the translator was saying...”--making excuses for myself! And then I finally realized: “Just shut up. You were sleeping. (laughter) Why do you need to defend yourself?” Why do you need to defend yourself? Many things like this.

In the west, we’re so attached to our emotions. When we’re in crisis, the world is supposed to stop, right? Everyone is supposed to pay attention to us when we’re in crisis. One time I was leading a course at Tushita, there were 70-80 westerners, and I was co-leading it with a Tibetan lama. This was in the 80s, a long time ago. I was doing this, and Zopa Rinpoche was there, and he was going to do self-initiation that night. You know, Rinpoche just does things all night. I so much wanted to do self-initiation— it’s so good when you do self-initiation because you purify your tantric vows— so the benefits of doing it are just enormous. But I also knew that if I stayed up all night doing it, that the next morning when I had to lead the course, I would be completely wasted.

I was sitting there completely guilt-tripping myself, “Oh, I should go. I should go. If I was really somebody with compassion I wouldn’t go to sleep. I’d go. This just shows what a lazy student I am, how little compassion I have. Rinpoche’s going to be so ashamed if

me if I don't go, and everybody else is going to renew their tantric vows and enter the mandala, and I'm just going to be sleeping...But if I go, I'm going to be too exhausted..." And on and on and on—it was completely a mess inside my mind. So, finally I decided that I was going to sleep. I woke up the next day, led the session, and it was fine.

I went to see Rinpoche that afternoon, and I was apologizing all over myself: "Rinpoche, I'm so sorry that I didn't come to the self-initiation."

And he looks up and goes, "Then?"

"Oh, well, it was really hard because I would be tired staying up all night, and I had to lead the course the next day."

"Then?"

And I would go on and on and on and on. I was asking him for absolution: I wanted him to absolve me. And he just kept looking at me—Rinpoche has this way of looking at you and going, "then?" Like saying, "So? Then? What else do you have to say for yourself? Then? Then?" (laughter) Until I realized, "Hey, it's just my mind that's making a big deal out of this. He doesn't care." Why am I asking him for absolution? I have to make my own decisions and bear responsibility for them and not ask somebody to absolve me. There are all these kind of things. There is so much to be learned from little situations like this.

It's amazing—our Tibetan teachers, in general, they don't care at all about our stories. We are so attached to our stories in the west. *My* story, *my* family background: "I was raised like this, and the family was so dysfunctional, and I was traumatized and this went wrong, and that went wrong. Then I was a teenager and such a mess, and this happened, and that happened, and (sighs). Always the world's been against me! Then I was an adult, and the people I trusted betrayed my trust, and everything I put my heart into didn't work out..."

You know how we are with our stories. We are so attached to our stories! And we can tell them over and over. We create this whole persona, this whole personality: this is who I am. And none of my Tibetan teachers have been at all interested in it! (laughter) They don't care. They aren't interested at all. And it's like, (melodramatic voice), "Wait a minute. This is my *story*. Don't you need to know all my hurts and abuses and pains and suffering so you can lead me on the path to enlightenment and show me your compassion?" No. That's the bottom line: No, he doesn't need to know all of that. Just the attachment we have to our stories. It's incredible. The Tibetans are not into their stories at all.

And I realized: in our culture, how do we create friendship? By telling each other our stories. That's how we become close friends and intimate friends. That's the currency of our friendship—how much of our suffering story that we tell to somebody indicates how close we are, and the level of trust we have in them. In Tibet, the currency of friendship has nothing to do with that. People don't care about that at all. The currency of friendship is how much physical help you provide to someone. Not emotional help, but physical help—when you need help with a particular job, or doing something, or getting something. The people you are close to are the people who you give help to and who you help. It has nothing to do with our emotional stories. It's interesting, isn't it? But we're so attached to our stories.

It's very interesting, all these things in relation to our teachers. I mean, how can somebody go, "then?" to my story? It's like my first Vajrasattva retreat: I told you, my whole Vajrasattva retreat was about 'me, I, my, and mine', and once in a while I got distracted and thought of Vajrasattva. (laughter) So how can somebody not think that my story is important? Okay, that's enough. Now, questions?

Retreatant: I was thinking about when you were saying that we have people in our lives who are 'bad friends', that can pull us away from our practice. Instead of just leaving them, one

way is to use the relationship as something to bounce off of, to keep your practice clear for yourself. To see that you could get pulled away, and work with that to resist it. Do you see what I'm saying?

VTC: So you're saying that when you have a friendship with somebody who does not have the long-term perspective or doesn't necessarily have good ethical values, instead of leaving them, then to keep it as something that's going to be a reminder for you?

R: Yes.

VTC: First of all, I'm not saying to leave these people: "Oh, you're a bad friend. Buddha said abandon you— Goodbye!" These people are sentient beings. Especially if they're relatives. It's not that. It's how to be compassionate with them but not be influenced by the values and the advice—which is the opposite to the Dharma. I think one thing that can be quite useful in that regard—and for me, very often at family gatherings you hear so many different opinions being expressed: opinions about money, or criticizing somebody, or whatever—you just take it all in, and then you go home, and on your meditation cushion, you compare this view with how the Buddha would see those things. You compare the view of the eight worldly concerns, the view of one life, and the view of many lives, the view of liberation and enlightenment. If you do it like that, then you can learn a lot from these kind of things.

But you have to really spend the time and think through it, because if you don't think through what they're saying, and just say, "Oh, that's a bad view—goodbye!" Then, because we ourselves are so familiar with these views, eventually we're going to wind up being influenced because we've heard them again and again and again. Each time you hear it, you have to say, "Okay, here's this person's view on something. What would the Buddha say about that?" You have a political discussion with somebody and they say, "we should just go bomb those people and blow them off the planet—they're not worthwhile." Then you come back, and you think, "what happens—what's the karmic result of bombing a lot of people? What's the karmic result of having that kind of hatred? Does it actually stop the conflict situation that is happening right now? What kind of situation does it create for us and for the other people in the future? Does this person's view work?"

You really think about it with your discriminating wisdom, and then you think, "what would the Buddha's view on this be? How would the Buddha look at this situation? When the Buddha talks about having compassion, is he just saying, 'Oh, yeah, give Osama Bin Laden some more bombs—that's perfectly all right. Let's have compassion and be generous and give somebody what he wants.'" Is that what he means? Is that what the Buddha would do? Clearly not. What really is the Buddhist perspective on this kind of thing? So you take something home and you really think about it.

Or, if you're with your family and friends, and they're saying, "If you just change the figures a little bit when you're reporting your income tax— do something with cash instead of a check so you have this income but you don't have to report it. Nobody knows about it—just do it like that. Everybody does it, save yourself some taxes..." Lots of people talk like that, don't they? Then you go home and think, "If I do that, what kind of mind is doing that? How does that fit with my precepts? What kind of karma is going to be created by doing that? What would the Buddha say about that?" Then you really spend some time thinking about this. I think if you do that, it helps clarify your views in the long-term.

R: I have a comment: two nights ago I felt that I was dying. I felt very, very bad. It was a difficult time for me. I had a lot of anxiety and wanted to run anywhere. The next day was difficult because in one of the meditations I had the feeling that I had to go, I had to run away—the feeling was so strong! It's interesting how an emotion can come up, and you can't control it.

VTC: First, the thing about very intense emotions... How many have seen your mind in this retreat, at one time or another, just go into incredible, intense emotion—almost uncontrollable? Who’s had that happen to them? (Almost all hands go up.) Who in the retreat has remembered times in their life when they’ve had that happen? (same) Or, you’ve remembered times in your life when you’ve been completely overwhelmed? Times when things come up very strong, and they just seem totally overwhelming at the time they’re happening—this is samsara, isn’t it? Welcome to samsara.

It’s so good that you’re seeing it, because usually these things just come up and they run the show. What’s happening is you’re sitting there on the cushion and you’re watching the movie. Here it is, in Technicolor, with all of its pain—it’s incredibly painful, isn’t it? You remember something in your past, some huge thing where you just completely went nuts—maybe you were just grieving with attachment, or attached and clinging and possessive of somebody, or angry and screaming at somebody, or depressed beyond means, or whatever. This stuff is there. We’re seeing it, and we’re sitting there through it. You watch it. It comes and “*nrrrggggh*—” and you’re so involved in it, and your mind is going crazy, and your mind is going crazy—and how long can you hang onto that emotion? How long can you hang onto it? It goes away, doesn’t it? Even if you don’t have the ability just to step back and watch it—even when you’re so involved in it, it still goes away.

Imagine, if you were able to just step back and watch it some more: it comes, and it throws this whole temper tantrum—this whole scene—and then it leaves this yucky feeling in your mind afterwards. You know how that feels. It just feels so yucky afterwards. And then, the mindstream keeps going. (laughter) And it wasn’t the end of the world.

Sometimes when that happens—when something intense is coming up like that—just say, “Ok, I’m experiencing this. How many other sentient beings have experienced this or are experiencing this right now? While I’m going through it, I will just take on all of their suffering, while my mind is having this horrible rage or anger.” You just think of taking it on for all sentient beings—whatever your mind is going through. Sometimes it’s raw emotion, sometimes the mind buys into the story, and you just go around and around the same story again and again: “there was this fight, and he said that, and I said this, and he said that, and I said this—what would have happened if I said that, but he couldn’t have said that because I said this and then this other person was involved, and then I would have been capitulating again so I had to stick up for myself, but what would the Buddha do? I don’t know because this person is wrong and I’m right, and the Buddha would be compassionate, and AAARRRGHH!” (laughter)

You just watch. It lasts for one session, and then it’s over, isn’t it? The thing to do when that happens is to just catch it. Instead of buying into it, as much as possible, realize “oh, this is what’s happening. We talked about it in the Q&A session. It’s happening right now. What did she say to do? Oh, I forgot, where’s my notebook? I was supposed to do something—what am I supposed to do when this happens?” What are you supposed to do?

R: Think of every sentient being and take on all their suffering.

VTC: Okay. So stand back and watch it, and then think of all the sentient beings and take on their suffering. Say, “this is my own negative karma, my own garbage mind causing this suffering. May I take on the pain and misery of all sentient beings.” And, it will be over soon—whatever big emotion it is, it’s going to be over soon, isn’t it?

R: For me, it was very difficult at the beginning of this Q&A, because I’ve been thinking a lot about death—especially my own death. I had two dreams in the past two nights. In one dream, I felt that I was dying, and I could actually feel the dissolution of my body. I could notice how my mind was reacting at this time. I was trying to apply some Dharma antidotes, but I didn’t know what to do—recite the Medicine Buddha mantra, or *Om Mani Padme Hum*,

or what. In my second dream, I was a prisoner, and I had a dream that I was raped by all the people in my cell. It was horrible for me. Finally, in talking about death, such as that of my relatives, I realized that I am always thinking about ‘me’: how bad I am going to feel if they die, for example. It’s always about me; it’s not about them. This is my comment. My question is, is the physical pain that we experience part of the purification process?

VTC: Very good question. When you’re doing a purification process like this, things will come up. Sometimes it comes up physically—I told you the story last week of the nun with the boil, remember?—so sometimes the purification comes like that. Sometimes it comes in dreams. And many people will have nightmares while they’re on retreat. How many of you have had nightmares at one time or another on retreat? (Several hands go up.) It happens. Sometimes what happens is that there’s some karma that could have ripened, let’s say in a painful situation this lifetime, or even in, let’s say, eons in the hell realm, but because you’re intentionally doing a purification practice, it will arise as a nightmare. You experience that suffering in the nightmare, and then that karma is consumed that way. That’s a very good way to think whenever you have a nightmare: just think that “this is the result of my own negative karma. Now that karma’s consumed.”

Also, be very aware that a nightmare was only a nightmare—it wasn’t reality. Okay, there was that very frightening, horrible situation—like what you said, you dreamt that you were raped by everybody in the cell. It’s a horrible thing to have happened. Even in a dream, it’s frightful. But then (snaps finger) it’s over, isn’t it? And you wake up and you can look back and you could say it was only a dream. It wasn’t reality. It was only a dream, so I don’t need to get so upset about it, because it was only a dream. There was nobody involved. It wasn’t a real me. There wasn’t anybody else really there. All this was simply an appearance to the mind.

They say that dreams are sometimes used as an analogy for what it’s like if we could realize emptiness. If you think of some of the people who are actually in prison who have been raped by everybody in their cell, if those people could realize emptiness at that time, they would be able to let go of that suffering in the same way as you can let go of the suffering of that having happened to you in a dream. You realize that it’s like a dream. Reality is like a dream. Things appear one way, but they don’t exist in that way. It doesn’t mean things ARE a dream, okay? There are people, there is me, and everything like that. But the way in which we exist is not the way in which we appear to exist, just like in the nightmare where you appear to be a real person and these people doing these horrible things to you appear to be real, but in actuality there’s no real people there, and there’s no real action there. It’s just an appearance. Similar in “real life,” it’s equally as unreal in the sense that things appear inherently existent, but they aren’t.

This might seem very intellectual, but if you look at the situation of having a nightmare—we’ve all had nightmares at one time or another— something frightful happening. What is it that makes a nightmare scary?

R: You think that it’s real.

VTC: It’s because we think it’s real, and because we think there’s a real ‘me.’ If there wasn’t the thought ‘ME’, then that whole nightmare wouldn’t be frightening, would it? Think about it. It’s like when you watch television: when you watch television and things are happening, they aren’t happening to you. They’re unpleasant to watch, but there’s not this feeling of ‘me’ so much in there, so you can watch the television. You see the dead bodies, but there’s not the feeling of ‘me’. But in a dream, what is it that makes the suffering in a dream so strong? It’s the feeling ‘me.’ This is the I-grasping, the grasping at the inherent existence of ‘me’. Even though there’s no real me in the dream, look at how intense that I-grasping is. There’s no real person there that’s getting beat up, or raped, or criticized, or

chased, or thrown around. There's nobody there, but our mind has invented the idea of a person and is holding onto it like mad.

Thus—although there's nothing there; it's a dream—it's so fearful and scary and miserable. Isn't that incredible when you think about it? Isn't that totally amazing, the amount of suffering we can experience in a dream simply because the mind has created the thought 'I.' And there's nobody there in the dream. There's nobody who's getting hurt. So similarly, when we're awake—in the sleep of our ignorance, when we're awake—just that thought 'I' is what makes everything so painful. When you were talking about thinking about the death of your loved ones and how you saw that... Why it's so painful is because you're thinking of how much you'll miss them, and not thinking of them. It's that thought of 'I.'

That's why I call it “the tyranny of I.” That thought, that grasping onto me—it's a tyrant, and it causes pain where there's no reason to have pain. If there wasn't that feeling, 'I,' then when these people died, we wouldn't be all freaked out because of missing them, and so we would be able to pay attention to them and send them on to their next life with love and affection. We wouldn't be sitting there spinning around ourselves. When this kind of thing happens, use it, and say, “Oh, this is why the Buddha said that grasping at inherent existence, especially of the 'I,' the self, why this is the source of suffering. Here's a perfect example in my life, in my dream, of why this kind of grasping is the root of suffering. This is why the Buddha said it's so important to realize that there's no real inherently existent person there. Because if I could realize that there's no solid 'me' there, this thing is not going to be suffering. And then if I could realize that all the other things I think are solid and real likewise aren't solid and real, then the whole thing really changes at that point.”

Use this as an example to really validate for yourself why what the Buddha taught is really true. Instead of getting afraid or instead of getting discouraged, look and say, “Oh, this is the source of my suffering. Now I see it really clearly.” Does that make some sense? R: And the physical pain?

VTC: The same thing: sometimes the karma we're purifying arises as physical pain. But simply by having a body we're going to have pain—that's the nature of this body, and that's why it's important to get out of samsara. As long as our mind is craving a body, life after life, we're going to keep on getting what we wanted. (laughter) They say, “be careful what you want—you might get it!” At the time of death, in the last life, we craved a body (hits her body): we got it! We got this body under the influence of ignorance and afflictions and karma—we got what we wanted. By nature, it's going to be painful. Take that and think, “This is important. This is why I have to realize emptiness, so that at my death *this* time I don't sit there and hang onto another body. This is why that even if I can't realize emptiness, and craving and clinging come up at death time, maybe I can at least say, ‘May I do it for the benefit of all sentient beings. May I come back in a way where I can continue practicing, where I can benefit sentient beings, where I can keep on practicing the path that I started practicing this lifetime.’”

Whatever you experience, it can fit right into the Lamrim; it can fit right into the Four Noble Truths. You can use what you're experiencing to validate from your own experience what the Buddha said. I know for me, when I first met the Dharma, one of the things that was so pointed for me was when my teachers were talking about how attachment was the cause of suffering, and anger was the cause of suffering, and selfishness was the cause of suffering. I had thought I was a pretty good person, and I had thought that all my suffering came from all these people I had to deal with on the outside. But when I started looking at my own mind, it was really seeing: my goodness, how selfish I am! Just incredibly selfish. And how attached I am to things. How much I make such a big deal about a little thing, and I have to get every little thing and make it the way I want it and have it the way I

want it to be! And how I get so angry when things don't happen the way I want them to! Then, to see that, it was like— "Yes! This is exactly why Buddha said that these things are the cause of suffering. Here it is: it's happening in my life, the second Noble Truth. The Buddha knew what he was talking about."

The point is that you use whatever you're experiencing to increase your understanding of the Dharma. Instead of just saying, "Oh, I had a nightmare. Oh, that's terrible! It feels so terrible!" Instead of dealing with things in the habitual way, try to respond to them in a different way. We can't control what is happening to us; the only thing we have an influence over is how we respond to it. Let me say it again, so you get it: We can't control what happens to us; the only thing that we have the possibility to control or to manage or work with is what our response is. Whatever our karma was in the past that's ripening right now, if we didn't want that thing to happen that's happening right now to happen, we should have not created the cause in the past. But we created the cause in the past. That cause is ripening right now—nothing to do about it when it's ripening. If we didn't purify it before it ripened, once it's ripening you can't undo the present, can you?

What we can control is our reaction to it. We have certain habitual reactions and ways that we just automatically fall into, how we respond to things. Instead of doing that, try responding as Vajrasattva would respond. Think about it, if Vajrasattva just woke up from a nightmare in which he got raped by everybody in the cell, what would Vajrasattva do? How would Vajrasattva deal with this nightmare?

R: He'd see the emptiness of it.

VTC: It's just a dream, similar to our life being like a dream. Would he use it to generate compassion?

Rs: Yes.

VTC: Think of the suffering of people who have this in real life—not only the people who are being raped, but have compassion for people who are doing the raping. They're creating the cause to have so much suffering themselves. Use it to generate compassion. How else could Vajrasattva see that nightmare?

R: As the ripening of his own negative karma.

VTC: Yes, as the ripening of his own negative karma. Created that karma, it ripened in a nightmare instead of a horrible rebirth or some other great suffering, fantastic—I'm so glad I had that nightmare!

R: In my dreams there are often two options: things that are right to do according to the precepts, or the wrong thing to do. I find myself making the right decision in the dream...

VTC: That's good! I find very often in dreams you can see a situation very clearly.

Sometimes I can see my bad habits very clearly in a dream. Or sometimes, like you said, you can see, "Wow! Something changed—I made a good decision and kept the precepts."

That's good.

R: Can you talk about how we can use this practice to purify ignorance, to purify our mind? If I do the visualization, I understand the karma: purifying the body and things like that, but with the third visualization, when you try to purify your mind, when you do the flash, the ignorance just feels more deeply rooted. It just doesn't feel like a quick blast is going to do it.

VTC: So you're saying how to purify the ignorance when you're doing the practice? And you're right, in the third visualization of turning on the light, just imagining that, sometimes it doesn't feel like a lot has changed inside of ourselves. So spend some time looking at the object of negation in your meditation, and try and identify the object of negation, and then see if it exists or doesn't exist. Just do some emptiness meditation, or do some meditation

about how the I is dependent-arising. Don't just count on the visualization to get rid of the ignorance, because it's more like you do the analytical meditation on the dependent arising, or the four-point analysis, and then you use the visualization to seal that, to confirm it, to reinforce it.

R: In the Lama Tsong Khapa practice you were talking about (VTC spoke about this on Lama Tsong Khapa day to retreatants), you do these visualization with all these different symbols, such as a sword coming into you. Do those visualizations themselves help to increase one's wisdom?

VTC: So in the Lama Tsong Khapa practice, when you're doing the visualizations to increase wisdom, do those practices increase your wisdom? I think the practices motivate us in some way, and get us more interested in the teachings on emptiness. If you're doing it with a positive motivation—doing the visualization and so on, and dealing with the symbols like that—it's going to purify maybe some of the karma from having abandoned the dharma, or having abandoned the teachings on emptiness, or having the karma from having wrong views. But just the visualization itself is not enough to give you the realization of emptiness; you have to do the analytical meditation. There is no other way besides that. The visualization and all of this is used to motivate us, to purify the gross karmic obstacles that impede us from thinking about this. But eventually we have to get down to the nitty-gritty: "How do I think I exist? Do I really exist that way?"

[Note: VTC provided a further reply to this question in Q&A #4, which is coming soon!]

R: Aren't the visualizations sort of a reconditioning of your senses to realize emptiness on a sensory level as well?

VTC: How do you mean?

R: I feel like if I can visualize something, then when I see you, for example, that's like a visualization—things become less solid... Is this reconditioning the senses in some way?

VTC: I think in that way doing visualizations— and it's like the things with the dreams— when we are doing the visualization they seem so real but they are all coming from the mind. Similarly, we can take that same kind of thing and apply it to things that we see with our senses. They look so real but they exist merely by our imputed mind. I think we can also see with the visualizations how if you visualize somebody you don't like, you can sit there and generate such incredible rage and anger and that person is nowhere around! So you begin to see you can't ever say "you made me angry," cause it's not the other person that made us angry because we get angry all by ourselves when we visualize.

We also see, through the use of visualizations. You know when you're thinking about the Buddha we can make ourselves very calm. And it's not a thing of "I need such and such environment on the outside to make myself calm." No. I need to change how I'm thinking and if I think of the Buddha and say the mantra and tune into that I can calm myself. You are beginning to see that what we experience comes from our own mind, not so much from outside.

I want to comment on something else that relates to this. They say that in your break time so see, when you are doing a tantric practice, to see everything as the deity, to hear all the sounds as mantra, and then to relate to all of your thoughts as the wisdom of bliss and emptiness. So what does that mean? There is a lot of confusion about this.

"See everybody as the deity." Does that mean that when you are walking around you start thinking that everybody is Vajrasattva with consort and you are looking at everybody, saying, "wait a minute, you've got to separate a little from Vajradhatu Ishwari to get the oatmeal in your mouth." (laughter) Is that what you're doing? Is that what it means to see everybody as the deity, that you're seeing them like this? It even relates to what it says in the

Lamrim, when they say to “see the spiritual mentor as a Buddha, or your tantric master as a Buddha.” Does that mean that when you look at your tantric master you’re supposed to see the crown *ushnisha*, and the curl on the forehead, and the webs on the fingers, and the long tongue... you’re supposed to see them having all the 32 marks and 80 signs? Is that what it means to see the guru as the Buddha? Is that what it means to see everything as the deity?

No. That’s not what it means. Because you just get yourself so confused—you can sit there and look at somebody, and you’re trying so hard to put an *ushnisha* on them, but meanwhile your mind is still grasping at inherent existence, isn’t it? What does it mean to see other beings as the deity? It means to see that they’re just appearances. They’re just appearances. That person who appears so strongly as an enemy—they’re not a real enemy. It’s just an appearance. You can dissolve them into emptiness, and they can re-emerge as Vajrasattva. The point is, when you’re seeing everybody as the deity, or when you’re seeing your teacher as the Buddha, it doesn’t mean that you’re trying to superimpose more stuff on them. (laughter) What you’re trying to do is take away all your projection of inherent existence that you have.

Similarly, “hear all sounds as mantra.” Does that mean that somebody’s saying “please pass the ketchup,” and you’re supposed to be hearing *Om Mani Padme Hum* or *Om Vajrasattva samaya*... Is that what it means? So all day long, you can’t have a normal conversation with anybody because you’re hearing everything as the mantra? (laughter) Somebody says something like, “close the door,” and you say, “*Om mani padme hum? Om mani padme hum? Om mani padme hum,*” because all you’re hearing is *Om mani padme hum?*

No, that’s not what it means to hear everything as mantra. Does it mean that you hear all your teachers’ instructions as mantra, and they don’t say anything but *Om mani padme hum* all day? No! What it means is this: when you hear “*Om mani padme hum,*” how does your mind react? The mind is peaceful; your mind is calm. You hear the Vajrasattva mantra, how do you react to it? Your mind just settles right down. You don’t get all involved in “I like it, I don’t like it, and why’d they say this, and why’d they say that...” Similarly, you hear everybody’s speech as if it were mantra, and we relate to it as if it were mantra. So there isn’t some speech that you say, “oh yeah, say more of that. It makes me feel good,” and there isn’t other speech where we say, “how dare you say that!” You respond to everything as if it were mantra: with that same kind of equanimity and sense of calm. That’s what it means.

What does it mean to “see all your thoughts as the wisdom of bliss and void?” Does that mean, “oh, I just had a thought about how I want to run down the hill and go to the movies and pick somebody up... Well, that’s the mind of wisdom and bliss and emptiness, so I guess I better do it, it’s the mind of the deity. Okay, bye everybody!” (laughter) Is that what it means? No. How is the deity relating to thoughts in their mind? As simply thoughts: dependent arising, little blips of energy that happen. The deity is able to relate what’s a virtuous thought, what’s a non-virtuous thought, to watch a thought rise and pass, to see the clear and knowing nature of the thought without getting involved in the content. That’s what “seeing your thoughts as the wisdom of bliss and emptiness” means. Seeing your thoughts as empty, also.

We have to really understand what this stuff is, otherwise it gets very confusing, and we’re walking around thinking, “Oh, everybody’s the deity, and here are two people screaming at each other, so I guess it’s just two wrathful deities saying ‘*Om Yamantaka Hum Phey*’ to each other. They’re both saying mantras to each other, and that’s all that’s happening.” Is that what it is? “Oh, they’re both just deities, they’re both right. Everything’s the mantra. All their thoughts are just the deity’s thoughts?” I mean, my goodness, Buddhism is supposed to make us less confused, not more confused! No.

What it means, is, if you’re relating to those two people as the deity, how are you going to relate to a deity? With respect. Aren’t you? So here’s two people quarreling: you

don't put them down and say, "these two ridiculous people, how can they be doing this." You relate to them with respect, the same way as you would relate to a Buddha. You see their speech as empty, so you see that your mind doesn't need to get bent out of shape about what they're saying. You don't need to become reactive to certain things and certain stuff, but you can still act in the situation. If two people are screaming at each other, do something to distract them and stop the quarrel. It doesn't mean you just have to sit there... "Oh yeah, Yamantaka and Hayagriva." (laughter) These techniques are methods to prevent us from generating ignorance, anger, and attachment.

It's like in *Bodhicharyavatara (Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life)*; Shantideva says that when certain things happen, such as criticism or something like that, he says, "may I remain like a piece of wood. May I remain like a log." For a long time, when I first read that, that was the view of "Buddhists just sit there like a bump on a log, going 'duuuuhhhhhh—duuuuhhhhhh.' Remain like a log: somebody's shouting, somebody's screaming. 'I better just sit there like a log—duuuuhhhhhh.'" Is that what Shantideva is teaching? No. That's not psychologically healthy.

Instead, think about a log. Somebody looks at the log and says, "oh, you're gorgeous!" Does the log have a response? No. Somebody looks at the log and says, "oh, you're filthy ugly!" Does the log have a response? No. Somebody sits on the log. Somebody kicks the log. Somebody moves it here or there. Does the log have an emotional reaction to every single small thing everybody says or does to it? No. "Oh, well wouldn't it be nice if I too didn't have an emotional reaction to every small thing that somebody does to me or says about me." That's what being like a log is. The log doesn't *care* if it's praised or blamed. Wouldn't it be nice: I don't care if somebody praises me; I don't care if somebody blames me. Who cares? That's what remaining like a log means; it doesn't mean you sit there going "duuhhhhh."

R: When we are not in the meditation hall, and things keep coming up because we are in silence, and something we brought up in the meditation hall comes up later, do we still keep purifying?

VTC: Yes, because lots of times things will come up in your meditation. The session only lasts a certain time and then you get up, and it's really important in your break time to keep the continuity of the energy of the session. If something is still very active and present in your mind, yes, continue to think about it. Continue to do the purification. It will make your retreat very rich.

R: Should we say the mantra?

VTC: When you're talking a walking, walk around, say the mantra. Look up in the sky. It's important—go outdoors, look at the sky, look far distances, and say the mantra. Look at all the snowflakes falling, at all these little Vajrasattvas coming. Say the mantra. Or listen to the silence, and ask, "what would it be if my mind were silent like it's silent outside?"

R: I've noticed that as time goes on, I'm much more sensitive to abrupt and loud noises. The other day in the meditation hall, there were these loud cracking noises, I don't know if the logs are settling or what...it's very disturbing to the nervous system. Is that just part of this? We're just so sensitive.

VTC: We are. Our mind is quieting down, so sensory things can sometimes be quite forceful. It can be jarring. Just take it as a reminder: "oh, it's a reminder to generate bodhichitta. That's Vajrasattva. Where's my mind—this time, when I hear the jarring sound, where's my mind? What's my mind thinking about? It's time to generate bodhichitta." But it is true, your mind does quiet down, and you do become more sensitive to stuff like that. But after a while you just develop an ability to take it, too.

R: This is related to an earlier question. I've been listening to some teachings of yours from years ago about Green Tara. In general, the approach that you give to purification—or at least, this is what I'm getting—is that it is mainly a psychological thing, something related to us. It is applying some technique to deal with our inner stuff, but it is basically us dealing with ourselves. But we are using all the Buddha figures, and saying these mantras and all that. I've been wondering for a while about Buddhas and bodhisattvas; I know that they exist, and that it's not just our imagination, and we are using those figures for a reason. We are not purifying without the Buddhas. So my question is, to what extent are we getting touched with something that is not us and is also helping to purify?

VTC: So you're asking to what extent is the purification just a psychological thing—we're dealing with symbols—and to what extent are there actual beings who are Vajrasattva who are helping us purify? I can't give you percentages. (laughter) I think there's both things at play. When I think about this, this is another area where I can really see where the grasping at inherent existence comes in. Either I think, "Oh there's Vajrasattva up there. There he is! There's that Buddha sitting on my head, a real Vajrasattva, and there's real nectar, and Vajrasattva's purifying me. There's a real being who's Vajrasattva who's purifying me." That's grasping at inherent existence, isn't it? "There's a concrete person who's Vajrasattva, and there's this concrete nectar that he's pouring into me, and everything is concrete and it's all coming from outside."

The other way is, "Oh, well there's actually nothing and it's all just my mind. There's absolutely no Vajrasattva. It's totally my imagination. It's just my imagination." I think that's also an extreme too. If it's just our imagination, why in the world did Vajrasattva spend three countless great eons getting enlightened? If sentient beings get liberated just by their own imagination, why does anybody need to practice the path to attain Buddhahood to help them get liberated?

I think that both those things—either it's an inherently existent Vajrasattva or it's an inherently existent me-and-my-imagination—both of them are based on inherent existence somehow. There are beings who are Vajrasattva. There's not just one Vajrasattva, many people can be enlightened in the aspect of Vajrasattva. Vajrasattva is also empty of inherent existence. Vajrasattva also exists by being merely labeled. There's no concrete Vajrasattva there that you can draw a line around and say, "This is him." There's no concrete negativity. There's no concrete nectar. There's no concrete 'my imagination'.

I think somehow, through us doing the visualization, in part it's a psychological thing, but in part we're making ourselves more receptive vessels so that the beings who are Vajrasattvas can actually help us. It's making ourselves more receptive so that they can actually help.

It's like, why do we do all these request prayers? The Buddhas and bodhisattvas are trying to help us all the time, why are we asking them? Because we're trying to make ourselves more receptive vessels so we can receive the help that they are giving us. So I think it's both things going on at the same time. I once asked His Holiness a little bit about this—why do we make all these requests and why do we make them to the Buddha?—and he said (He used Roosevelt as an example), "I guess you could make requests to Roosevelt but could Roosevelt really bless your mind?" So it made me think, "Okay, let's say I'm saying, 'oh dear, FDR., please may I attain Bodhicitta.'"

From the point of view of me expressing my deepest wishes, that's the same as making requests to Vajrasattva. "Please, I want to generate Bodhicitta. Please inspire my mind." But His Holiness said, "Even if you requested him, could FDR really help you?" Well, no. If Roosevelt—let's assume he's an ordinary being—what's he going to help me with? He's probably in some other realm totally oblivious to what I'm requesting. Or even if

one of you is the manifestation of Roosevelt, you've forgotten it and don't even realize I'm requesting you (laughter)—if you're Roosevelt's rebirth or something. Roosevelt from his side doesn't have the ability to help me.

But if I make requests to a Buddha, from the side of a Buddha, they've spent all this time developing their own capabilities to be of benefit. So they have some capability that Roosevelt doesn't have. I may not be able to say EXACTLY what it is, what's going on. But something's happening there. It's kind of a cooperative effort.

R: I have a question that's related to something you were saying earlier. When I was doing the meditation I found the same problem. Thinking in the Taking and Giving [tonglen] meditaion, when I put in front of me our friends, George Walker, Osama, and all these guys. So when I'm thinking about giving them what they want—because that's what it says in the guideline... So I think, something like, "Okay, think about them, what do they want, what do they need?" I was wondering. These guys want more money for bombs. So the question is, do I give him—in my Taking and Giving—what he wants or what I think he needs to become a better person?

VTC: What do you think?

R: Oh that's my idea but...

VTC: Do you imagine giving him bombs in Taking and Giving? Does that mean you become the world's chief weapon manufacturer in your meditation?

R: It doesn't make much sense.

VTC: No, it doesn't make much sense at all. What sentient beings really want is a peaceful mind. What they think they want is more bombs. What they really want is a peaceful mind. So you're giving them what they really want: some security, some peaceful mind, some ability not to feel afraid, to be more patient and tolerant. That's what you imagine giving them in the Taking and Giving meditation: what they really want, not what they think they want.